

Indian building collapse kills 75

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8 April 2013

At least 75 people, including 17 children, were killed and more than 65 others injured in a building collapse in Mumbra, a suburb of Mumbai, on April 4. The tragedy exposes the abysmal living conditions facing millions of working people in the country's financial centre, which is also home to many of India's super-rich.

At the time of the collapse—around 6 pm—there were some 150 people in the residential building, mostly poor labourers who paid monthly rents of between 2,000 and 2,500 rupees (\$US36-45) for a flat. Many were migrant workers employed in construction and other exploitative industries. In addition, 10 to 15 children were attending tutorial classes in the building.

One eyewitness said: “The building collapsed like a pack of cards within three to four seconds.” A schoolgirl, Hasina Shaikh, told the media she was lucky to be still alive. “I had just returned from school and was changing when the building started shaking and came down on us,” she said. “When I regained consciousness later, I was in the hospital.”

According to a National Disaster Response Force official, three floors were sandwiched together. Rescue workers had to use sledgehammers, power saws and hydraulic jacks to remove the wreckage of steel and concrete, heaped up to eight metres deep.

Irfan Siddiqui lost 10 members of his family, including his pregnant wife and his mother. Cursing his decision to move into the building, he said: “I was fooled by the builder. We all fell into his trap.”

Politicians, government officials and the media immediately pointed to rampant corruption that enabled builders to circumvent limited building codes. In working class suburbs, developers routinely cut costs by using shoddy materials, unsound designs and unqualified staff in order to maximise profits.

“We have seen this building rise to the eighth floor in 34 days. I am a labourer and have worked on many

projects, but have never seen such a rapid construction,” one worker said.

State labour minister Ganesh Naik admitted: “This building had no occupation certificate. It doesn't have an architect or a structural consultant. The building came up in one-and-a-half months. So naturally the construction will be poor.” The building had been constructed illegally on land owned by the forest department.

The police arrested the builders, Jamil Qureshi and Salim Shaikh, and filed a case of culpable homicide against them. But these individuals are being made scapegoats in order to deflect attention from the failure of all levels of government to enforce adequate building standards.

Maharashtra Chief Minister Prithviraj Chavan suspended deputy municipal commissioner Deepak Chavan for dereliction of duty, and K. P. Naik, senior inspector of the Daighar police station, for allegedly colluding with the builders of the ill-fated apartment. Chavan admitted that a staggering 90 percent of buildings in the suburb of Mumbra were illegal or irregular.

Anti Corruption Bureau officials also acknowledged that unauthorised construction was widespread, often facilitated by corrupt officials, but blamed residents for not reporting cases to them. However, Mangal Patil, a social activist, said he had sent documents to the local municipality and state ministers, showing that the land was illegally acquired, but no action had been taken.

Two months ago, a superintendent ward officer from the local Thane Municipal Corporation and two police constables were arrested for graft. They allegedly turned a blind eye to an illegal construction, then extorted money from the building owners and occupants by threatening to demolish it.

According to a Thane Municipal Corporation spokesman, more than 2,000 illegal structures had been

built in the area in recent years. Only now are local authorities demolishing an illegal seven-floor building near the collapsed one, and other illegal structures.

Major projects also suffer from shoddy, unsafe construction. A flyover bridge being built at Mumbai's main airport collapsed last February. In 2011, the chief organiser for the Commonwealth Games in India was arrested over corruption related to the building of a stadium. More than 2,500 people are killed every year across India in building collapses.

India suffers an acute shortage of affordable housing, especially in major urban areas where many migrant workers go in desperate search for work. Financial speculation has further inflated real estate prices. In 2012, India's urban housing shortage was estimated at nearly 19 million homes, according to a report by the ministry of housing.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Mumbai, where real estate speculation drove up prices by 285 percent between 2005 and 2011. Luxury flats, costing more than 20 million rupees, increased as a proportion of total flat construction from 9 to 22 percent. Mumbai is now considered one of the most expensive cities in the world.

Profits are made not just at the top end of the market, but also in the construction of what amount to slums. Rents are kept relatively affordable by cutting the cost of construction. The city's various slum clearance projects to make way for the rich and upper middle classes only compound the demand for cheap accommodation.

One journalist explained: "The modus operandi is frightening. In a matter of three months, small-time builders encroach on land and erect multi-storey buildings that are quickly absorbed by locals." By using inferior materials and avoiding regulations, they are able to sell the cramped premises to the poor and still make a profit.

Mumbra has seen its population rise 20-fold since the 1990s and its real estate prices have skyrocketed in the past five years. The *Indian Express* reports that over 40 percent of the population in the area lives in slums.

At the same time, Mumbai is home to some of the wealthiest people in India, indeed in the world. As of last year, according to *Forbes* magazine, the city had 26 of the country's 61 dollar billionaires. Many have made their fortunes through property development and

real estate speculation, and operate closely with all levels of government in India.

Mukesh Ambani, an oil, gas and petrochemical magnate with a fortune of \$21.5 billion, was on the top of the *Forbes* list for 2012 as India's wealthiest man, for the fifth year in a row. He lives in Mumbai in a 27-storey building, which has a ballroom, theatre, gym, six stories of car parking and its own helipad.

The huge gulf created by capitalism between the absurdly rich and the desperate poor is nowhere more evident.



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